

Whatever Happened to Deep Ecology?

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The Trumpeter was founded as an ecophilosophy newsletter in 1983 by Alan Drengson of the University of Victoria, Canada. Shortly thereafter it evolved into a scholarly research publication, facilitating the exploration of a diversity of “ecosophies,” defined, in the words of the journal’s founder, as personal life philosophies that try to live by an ecological wisdom in harmony with the natural world. It’s been *more* than thirty years since the founding of the journal, so this 30th Anniversary Special Issue comes a bit late. In our defence, this is the thirtieth *volume* of the journal; the first volume spanned two years, which throws the counting off a little. Regardless, because *The Trumpeter* has always had a clear orientation towards the deep ecology movement, this milestone presented an opportunity for both expanded and focussed reflection on the past, present, and future of deep ecology.

The journal’s editorial team thus solicited papers meant to stimulate debate around the contribution of deep ecological thinking to environmental discourse. Our hope was to be provocative without attracting the kind of vitriol and polemic directed against deep ecology in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, we hoped to see assumptions of all sorts contested in these pages – including assumptions that deep ecology, like “nature,” is a spent force. The response has been most gratifying. We have contributions from éminence grises and young scholars, dissenters and defenders, all critically exploring the legacy and future of deep ecology as our species faces the moral challenges of the (putatively) Anthropocene epoch. Soul searching is a healthy process that all philosophical and social movements need to go through if they are to remain relevant, and *The Trumpeter* is proud to provide a forum for precisely this kind of discussion.

I.

Our call for papers listed a number of possible topics for the special issue, and while these were not intended as a set of requirements or limitations, each submission ended up responding in one way or another to the questions we posed. First, the opinion pieces by David Abram and George Sessions spoke to the ongoing relevance of deep ecology with respect to current environmental problems. Abram explores what the “deep” in deep ecology might mean when it is not defined in opposition to conventional reformist sorts of environmentalism. The “depth” that attracted so many people to the movement, Abram suggests, was the element of subjective relation to the perceived world which embedded the human being within the landscape, as opposed to the “detached and impartial perspective” idealized by modern

scientific ways of knowing. The problem isn't necessarily science per se, but rather an exclusive reliance on it in place of "the primacy of our bodily embedment" in our terrains. In a different vein, Sessions' piece starts out by emphasizing how many of the founders of deep ecology were scientists, including, he argues, Rachel Carson. By giving a short historical overview of the development of deep ecology, his main point is that the West failed to act in the face of compelling ecological warnings because of the dominance of anthropocentric ideologies. Far from being a relic of the 1980s and 1990s, Sessions sees these worldviews being perpetuated and celebrated in the present day by advocates of the Anthropocene, or so-called postenvironmentalists, ecomodernists, and bright greens. Rather than being out of date, then, deep ecology is as relevant as it has ever been, not least as an alternative to the fashionably acquiescent tone currently making the rounds in environmental discourse.

II.

Of course, one of the challenges deep ecologies face is the putative end of nature, the fait accompli whereby that which deep ecologists have cared so much for is declared dead. Key among such post-natural theorists is Bruno Latour, and Elisa Cavazza explores his critique of Arne Naess with erudition and insight. She sides with Latour, who sees Naess as retaining and replicating the modernist notion of an objective "Nature" apart from and transcendent of the socio-political realm of humans. At the same time, however, she critiques Latour for underplaying his own similarities with Naess, as both authors struggle to overcome the modern approach to environmental problems. Therefore, Cavazza calls ecosophy to continue theoretically refining and developing its conceptions of both the *oikos* and the *polis*, the two poles which Latour argues cannot be separated. As Cavazza sees it, the end of nature does not obviate the need for ecosophy, but rather intensifies it.

In this respect, then, the answer to another question posed in our call for papers – "does environmental philosophy need a metaphysics?" – is a resounding "yes," for reflections on ecological society after the (putative) end of nature are nothing but metaphysics.¹ Mick Smith's paper makes short work of the polemical bluster classically levelled against deep ecology, before diving into what he sees as a "gaping hole in its analyses," viz. the role of the social world when theorizing the biotic world. Smith's own analysis may cause some to worry that he is descending into relativism, but he is emphatic that "recognising the reality of social relations does not mean that we are driven to deny every society's dependence on a more-than-social

¹ Compare with Eric Katz, "Reconsidering the Turn to Policy Analysis," *Environmental Ethics* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 131-132, who urges environmental philosophers to "continue to examine the metaphysical issues of the relationship between humanity and nature to uncover the basic meaning and value of the natural world" (132).

world that predates it and will also antedate it....” While Smith thinks deep ecology can do better in its appropriation of social theory, he concludes that “the time is ripe” for a deeply ecological contribution to social theory which counters and exceeds the exclusive humanism of that field.

The special issue’s call for papers also raised the question of where the eight-point platform of deep ecology might stand today, in light of current environmental debate, activism, or challenges. John Clark takes up this issue in his paper, which revisits the legendary clash between deep ecology and social ecology. He examines a number of strands in deep ecology which he thinks avoid many of the problems that social ecologists had pointed out, before going on to argue that in some respects the eight-point platform stands in the way of these positive aspects. Clark’s paper offers a new perspective on the past debate between these two contenders, seeing it in more constructive terms, and indeed productive of a vision of an Ecozoic (rather than Anthropocene) Age with “the power to inspire positive envy in large masses of people.” This is a positive development indeed.

Arran Gare’s piece draws together many of the critical suggestions made by the preceding articles into a bold synthesis that aims to both explain the marginalisation of deep ecology in contemporary discourse and point a way forward towards an ecological civilisation. Gare situates deep ecology within the larger stream of the “Radical Enlightenment” which, he argues, has affirmed the self-creativity of nature against an all-encompassing mechanistic atomism since at least the Renaissance. But because deep ecology and other representatives of the Radical Enlightenment were unable to offer a convincing alternative to the “alliance of market fundamentalism and managerialism” that is neo-liberalism, environmentalism was co-opted by the rhetoric of sustainable development. Philosophy and the humanities in general were left powerless to challenge these threats, themselves having given themselves over to the “intellectual parlour games” of positivist analysis and otiose postmodernism. The good news, according to Gare, is that the replacement of anti-reductionism with semiotics in ecology provides an opportunity for radical environmentalists to succeed where previous generations failed: “to develop a dialogic, polyphonic grand narrative that acknowledges diverse perspectives, ...endlessly struggling to do justice to every aspect of reality.” It’s a daunting task, but one fully consonant with deep ecology’s search for profoundly different ideological structures that appreciate the true quality of life.

III.

The Trumpeter’s call for papers also solicited reassessments or new overviews of the history of deep ecology that would, in the process, offer new perspectives and critical commentary on the

present and future, in addition to the past. Ronnie Hawkins' paper presents a narrative history of her own engagement with the deep ecology movement, and a philosophical analysis of what she sees as the reasons for why "deep ecology had to die." She covers the conflicts with social ecology and ecofeminism, and suggests that the September 11th attacks on the United States created a political need to scapegoat deep ecology for ecoterrorism. Hawkins weighs in on the rise of Continental environmental philosophy, extensively criticising the constructivist tendency to deny the existence of a pre-discursive ground, while engaging appreciatively with other aspects of the school. Her critique of militarism and academic compartmentalisation is scathing, for they serve to safely exclude any questioning of the status quo. And yet this is what deep ecology always did and must continue to do: recognize that there is an "outside" which relativises the social realities within which we find ourselves enmeshed. Without it, our species loses its own self-awareness.

Max Oelschlaeger takes a different tack, situating the history of deep ecology within deep geological time. From that perspective, the Anthropocene embraced by neo-conservationists and lamented by Sessions is a virtually instantaneous disruption. But Oelschlaeger also considers the possibility that, within this time frame, deep ecology is meaningless as well. Nevertheless, he sees deep ecological consciousness manifesting in current trends in architecture and city planning, the fine arts, alternative economics, and the social studies of science and technology. As such, deep ecology is not a matter of carrying a card or adhering to a platform, but is rather a "multivalent discourse that cuts across the entirety of human agency." The meaning of deep ecology, he suggests, is not to be found in its temporal location in geological time, but within the realization that meaning as such only comes into view at all with the recently evolved human brain and not otherwise. Deep ecology's meaning is its awareness of the incompatibility of the evolved natural system with the dominant cultural system. Oelschlaeger thus finds himself in a position to dispute the advocates of the Anthropocene, because – as Dolores LaChapelle, "a wild woman of the San Juans" used to say – even though "nothing can be changed, everything is possible." Perhaps the Anthropocene cannot be stopped, but that doesn't mean we cannot ecologically transform the human endeavour.

The narrative section of the special issue concludes with Michael Zimmerman's reflections on his involvement with deep ecology and environmental philosophy more generally. He offers fascinating anecdotes about many key figures in the field – including George Sessions, Holmes Rolston, Dolores LeChapelle, Bill Devall, Warwick Fox, and Gary Snyder – and gives an account of some of the tensions and theoretical variations within deep ecology. Zimmerman describes his ongoing interests in ecofeminism, social constructivism and Green postmodernism, how he let go of his Heideggerian ecosophy, and gives an in-depth account of his reasons for finally

moving away from deep ecology toward integral ecology. The main bone of contention between himself and Sessions and Devall, he says, “had to do with the human place in the cosmos,” itself a metaphysical question one expects deep ecological thinkers to continue wrestling with – hopefully in the pages of this journal, no less. As he wraps up, Zimmerman takes the opportunity to mend a few fences with the deep ecology movement, a gracious end to his insightful narrative.

IV.

The final suggestion made in our call for papers referred to the spiritual dimensions of the environmental crisis, which deep ecology embraced somewhat more readily than other schools of environmental theory. Of course ecology and religion has developed as a sub-discipline of its own ever since the publication of Lynn White, Jr.’s seminal 1967 paper “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” but as shown by Kelly Shepherd’s review of Bron Taylor’s 2010 book *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*, the dark green in Taylor’s title “implies depth.” Indeed, the connection to deep ecology is explicit in the book. Interestingly, our reviewer notes the indistinct line between mainstream “green” and more radical “dark green” religious phenomena, something that might bear further consideration within deep ecology as well. In any case, for Taylor the key is to recognise the sacred “awe and mystery” within or throughout the natural world, and its connection to intrinsic value, which is perhaps what deep ecology had always tried to articulate.

V.

The contributions to this special issue thus represent a wide breadth of questions, from politics to metaphysics to religion, and exemplify both the passionate defence and openness to revision that must characterise any living tradition. A number of answers have been given to the overarching question of deep ecology’s fate. *The Trumpeter’s* editorial team has even toyed with an answer of its own: *dispersion*. For even if the phrase “deep ecology” has fallen out of frequent use in the academic and activist literatures, the concerns which characterised it have not. The metaphysics and intrinsic value of nature remains an active topic in environmental philosophy, pragmatism notwithstanding. The issue of human overpopulation is coming back into the light, from Phil Cafaro and Eileen Crist’s 2012 book on the topic² to a 25th January 2015 editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* outlining the need to address population growth’s effect on anthropogenic climate change. Radical social change is being discussed and advocated in a

² Reviewed in *The Trumpeter* 29, 1 (2013): 64-72.

variety of avenues, from the economic degrowth movement to peak oil theorists like John Michael Greer. Meanwhile, the spiritual and artistic aspects of environmental concern continue to be explored in fields like eco-theology and groups like The Dark Mountain Project.

At the same time, with such dispersal (especially if it was effected by political attack, as Hawkins argues in the pages below) comes the thought of demise. Does the deep ecology movement have an “essence” or identity if it cannot be tied to a single ecosophy or platform? If not, then it is difficult to see how it could die in the first place. If it has an essence, is its dispersal equivalent with death? I’m inclined to think that deep ecology is constituted by the intuition that there is something fundamentally flawed about the current state of global civilisation. As such, the deep ecology movement might be better understood as describing all manner of “radical” ecologies, rather than a discrete school of thought that competes with, say, ecofeminism. This frees it to not only judiciously appropriate criticisms levelled against it, but to provide a unity – even if after the fact – of various facets of radical environmental criticism and activism that would otherwise appear disparate and fragmented. If this gathering function proves to have an enduring and mobilising integrity, then perhaps deep ecology has done its job – even if it fails to singlehandedly effect a radical transformation of our civilisation. That, I imagine, will take more than metaphysics or policy or religion, but at the same time, it won’t happen without those things.

I confess that I feel a bit sheepish speculating about the essence of deep ecology, as I was barely a year old when George Sessions first met Michael Zimmerman, nor was I even born when Arne Naess coined the term. At the same time, it will be new generations who will assess its vitality and utility for encountering the distressing environmental contexts we will undoubtedly face. If there is indeed an environmental crisis, and that crisis demands fundamental changes in the way humans position themselves in the cosmos, then I daresay that’s where deep ecology will be found – and, of course, on the pages of *The Trumpeter*.